

A lesson on how to GET BACK UP ON YOUR HORSE

By Diana LaChance

When the April 2011 tornadoes blew off a 20-by-70 foot strip of Jesse Tatum's back barn and beat up his front barn, the destruction wasn't just physical. It also took its toll psychologically on the Henagar resident.

"The tornado changed everything," says Tatum, who was working for Heil Environmental in Fort Payne at the time. "After it came through, I took medical leave and then vacation. Then, I sort of lost interest in working all together and ended up getting a volunteer layoff."

He still had to make a living though. The question now was how. "I sort of thought I would do something with horses," he says, fondly recalling his childhood days spent riding his cousin's ponies. "I would always be over there after I got my chores done, and later my wife and kids and I would go to Pigeon Mountain and ride."

So he started thinking about the ponies he already owned, the ponies that his kids rode. "We had a lot of people come over and want to ride them," he says, "so I decided I'd see if these people would pay to ride." And they did, though Tatum would be hard pressed to explain the attraction.

"I couldn't tell you why kids love pony rides so much," he says, "but there's probably only 1 out of 50 who are afraid. Even then, they'll still look – and they usually end up riding!"

Whatever the reason, the kids kept coming, and eventually those rides-for-pay turned into a bona fide business: Highpoint Trails Pony Parties. From there, business spread by word of mouth. "Once I did one birthday party, everyone at that party knew about us and then their kids wanted one," he says.

Before long, he was providing pony, trail, and carriage rides for Bible study groups, corporate events, and even reunions and weddings. "Nowadays, we do a lot of standing events, like the Potato Festival, the Rainsville Rodeo and the Latino Festival," says Tatum, "and we partner with places like John Jones Elementary and Westbrook Christian Schools in Rainbow City and the Crosspoint Community Church, among others."

He's also expanded into making saddle frames, known as saddle trees, using the equipment at his son's saddle store and a workshop that sits by his barn. "I didn't know how to do it – I had to learn," he says. "The guy that sold us the equipment came down and taught me how to saw them out. Now I sell them to the saddle makers, and they put the leather on them and sell the saddles."

Is it profitable? "If I didn't have so many horses that I don't need, it would be profitable!" says Tatum, who currently has 25 Shetland and Welsh ponies, 14 horses and 1 mule. Like any animal lover, he is a victim of his own huge heart. "It's hard to decide which ones to get rid of. Then I take in horses I shouldn't, and the ones that don't know enough, I keep thinking I can teach."

His mule, Bonnie Sue, is a perfect example. She has been ridden only a handful of times and hardly comes close to earning her keep. But while



BACK IN THE SADDLE - When he's not taking care of his ponies and doing parties and pony rides, Jesse Tatum is making saddle trees which are the frames for saddles. "I sell them to saddle makers and they put the leather on them and sell the saddles."

Tatum likes to threaten her, with such statements as "If you got a mule, you need to be a mule person!" and "You don't need a mule and forty horses!", it is clear his beloved Bonnie Sue isn't going anywhere.

Tatum's profits are further diminished by the unavoidable expenses that horse ownership conveys. "It's not cheap. You have to have lands, fences, grass, the horse, the tack, the trailer, the truck," he says. So even if he wanted to give up the business and retire, he couldn't. "I can't afford to saddle up and go into the wild blue – I have to pay the light bill!" he says.

That's why he and his grandsons do so much on their own, from feeding and training to shoeing and medical care. "Anything you don't know, somebody does. Just don't be ashamed to ask," he says. "We don't pretend to know it all, we just know who to ask." And unlike Bonnie Sue, most of the horses do earn their keep, which Tatum says is "one way of having them and them not being dead weight."

Yet despite the cost and the aggravation, Tatum says he wouldn't change a thing — except maybe to have begun this second chapter of his life much earlier. "I wish I had left (Heil) sooner, and I kept telling myself I would," he says. "But I'm going to do this as long as I can."

Certainly he never takes it for granted that he is able to make a living from doing what he loves, a fact his father would be proud of. "My dad hated horses with a passion, so he never encouraged me. To him, a pony was useless," he says. "But every time I do a birthday party, I get on one and ride, because I promised my dad that someday somebody would pay me to ride my own pony."

That promise seemed a long way from being fulfilled in April 2011. But they say when a door closes, a window opens. For Tatum, that window opened to his life-long passion. And just as those damaged barns were patched back up in the aftermath of the tornado, so too was their owner. ■

JUST HORSIN' AROUND - Kids love the pony carousel that is part of the party package offered through Highpoint Trail Pony Parties in Henagar.